

« THE MEDIEVAL BACKGROUND

the work of Beckett's secretary in 1159 to the work of Henry VIII's chaplain in 1537, the analogy by which society is described—an analogy at once fundamental and commonplace—is the same.¹⁸ Invoked in every economic crisis to rebuke extortion and dissension with a high doctrine of social solidarity, it was not finally discarded till the rise of a theoretical individualism in England in the seventeenth century. It is that of the human body* The gross facts of the social order are accepted, in all their harshness and brutality. They are accepted with astonishing docility, and, except on rare occasions, there is no question of reconstruction. What they include is no trifle. It is nothing less than the whole edifice of feudal society—class privilege, class oppression, exploitation, serfdom. But these things cannot, it is thought, be treated as simply alien to religion, for religion is incomprehensible. They must be given some ethical meaning, must be shown to be the expression of some larger plan. The meaning given them is simple. The facts of class status and inequality were rationalized in the Middle Ages by a functional theory of society, as the facts of competition were rationalized in the eighteenth by the theory of economic man and the former took the same delight in contemplating the moral purpose revealed

in social organization, as the latter in
proving that to
the curious mechanism of human society a
moral
purpose was superfluous or disturbing,
Society, like
the human body, is an organism composed
of different
members. Each member has its own
function, prayer,
or defence, or merchandise, or tilling the
soil. Each
must receive the means suited to its
station, and must
claim no more. Within classes there must be
equality ;
if one takes into his hand the living of two
neighbour
is short. Between them is
; otherwise a class cannot perform its
function; or—a
strange thought to us—enjoy its rights.
Peasants
must not encroach on those who have them.
Lords must